



A Promise Fulfilled

Syracuse University graduates its first class of Say Yes Scholars

BY CHRISTINE YACKEL

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY'S 159TH COMMENCEMENT heralded the beginning of a bright future for each of the 5,533 newly minted graduates. None more so than the 47 members of the first class of Say Yes Scholars who realized their dreams of graduating from college with an SU degree. Their success was due, in part, to the Syracuse chapter of Say Yes to Education, part of a national, non-profit education foundation committed to increasing high school and college graduation rates for the nation's urban youth by offering support programs and the promise of free college tuition.

Founded by philanthropist George Weiss in 1987, Say Yes also operates in Philadelphia, Hartford, Harlem, and Buffalo. "Say Yes had always focused on small cohorts in large cities, but in 2008, Syracuse became the site of the first city-wide implementation of the program," says Pat Driscoll, Say Yes Syracuse director of operations. "Syracuse was chosen because of Chancellor Cantor's leadership, philosophy of investing in the community, and relationships with other colleges in the region. Her vision and support are what make Say Yes Syracuse unique."

All 21,000 K-12 students currently enrolled in the Syracuse City School District (SCSD) are considered future Say Yes Scholars, who must meet the same criteria for college admission as other applicants. In addition to free college tuition—subsidized by donations from the private sector, endowment funds, and partner institutions—Say Yes Syracuse offers such after-school and summer aca-

demical and enhancement programs as tutoring and Regents exam workshops, SAT courses, and college nights to help students and their parents complete college application and financial aid forms. SCSD high school graduates who meet residency and college admission requirements may choose from more than 100 institutions participating in the Say Yes Higher Education Compact of state, community, and private college partners, including SU, which has 171 Say Yes Scholars currently enrolled. Once on campus, students can avail themselves of special networking, internship, and career development events hosted by Say Yes Syracuse.

According to Driscoll, Say Yes Syracuse provides opportunities most students may not have had otherwise, including academic, health and wellness, and social and emotional support. Since 2008, SCSD has seen a 20 percent increase in college matriculation rates and a 6 percent uptick in high school graduation rates. "Our program, which began rolling out quadrant by quadrant in 2008, has only been fully operational district-wide since 2011, so we expect to see those numbers continue to increase as we go forward," Driscoll says. "There are many children in Syracuse who have to overcome a lot of obstacles even before the school doors open for the day, so if you look at the collective work Say Yes Syracuse has done with all of its partners, I really believe it levels the playing field."

Meet four Say Yes Scholars from the Class of 2013 who have forged a path for other Syracuse city school students to follow.



SOMIYA ALTHEBLAH '13

"I would like to thank Mr. Weiss and Say Yes Syracuse for giving me hope for humanity."

EDUCATION: Henninger High School; psychology major/biology minor, College of Arts and Sciences.

ACTIVITIES: Resident advisor; Rebecca Lee Pre-Health Society; Psychology Club.

CAREER GOAL: Physician's assistant

NEXT STEPS: Working part-time and completing clinical hours needed to become a physician's assistant.

SAY YES EXPERIENCE: An avid Orange basketball fan since childhood, Somiya Altheblah had always dreamed of studying at Syracuse University. She even took SU Project Advance courses in high school to prepare herself for

college-level work. But as the youngest of five children, she worried about how she would pay for her education and realized that for financial reasons, SU was out of reach. She applied to SU anyway and was thrilled when her acceptance letter arrived along with the offer of a Say Yes Tuition Scholarship. Her older sister and brothers were a bit envious of her because they had missed out on such an incredible opportunity. "I'll always be grateful that the scholarship took a burden off of my shoulders and gave me the freedom to focus on my schoolwork," says Altheblah, whose parents moved to Syracuse from Yemen 30 years ago. "Also, graduate school is now an option because if I do have to take out student loans, I will see a much quicker return on my investment. Say Yes has opened up a path for me, so on behalf of myself and my nieces and nephews who are currently involved in Say Yes summer programs, I would like to thank Mr. Weiss and Say Yes Syracuse for giving me hope for humanity."

EDUCATION: Fowler High School; social work and psychology majors, David B. Falk College of Sport and Human Dynamics.

ACTIVITIES: President of Social Workers United, a student service organization.

CAREER GOAL: Social work with a focus on suicide intervention.

NEXT STEPS: Plans to attend SU's School of Social Work in the fall to earn a master's degree in social work; hopes to intern at the VA Medical Center in Syracuse.

SAY YES EXPERIENCE: David Minney was academically prepared for college and looked forward to the challenge. He knew the cost of attending a private university, like Syracuse, was beyond his family's financial resources, so he limited his college search to more affordable institutions. But two weeks before the beginning of his senior year of high school, he heard about the Say Yes Tuition Scholarships. At first, Minney was in disbelief and thought the offer was too good to be true. But once he realized Say Yes was in fact, for real, his options opened up dramatically. "Without financial support from Say Yes, I would have never even applied to Syracuse University," says Minney, whose father went back to college later in life, making him the first traditional college student in his family. "Say Yes now plants seeds early on so kids will be well-prepared academically and socially by the time they're ready for college. Education is the path to a better life, and the current trajectory of Say Yes students will have an amazing impact on the community. I intend to stay in Syracuse after I earn my master's degree in social work. It's where I grew up, and it is home."

DAVID MINNEY '13

"The current trajectory of Say Yes students will have an amazing impact on the community."



JAKIA DURHAM '13

"I never imagined I
could aim so high."

EDUCATION: Corcoran High School; criminal justice major, Herkimer County Community College; sociology major, College of Arts and Sciences.

ACTIVITIES: Worked three jobs to pay for housing, meals, and expenses.

CAREER GOAL:
Defense attorney

NEXT STEPS: Taking a semester off after graduation to earn money; plans to study for the LSAT exam, and apply to law school.

SAY YES EXPERIENCE: At the beginning of her senior year in high school, Jakia Durham wasn't sure she wanted to go to college, but her guidance counselor would not take no for an answer. She told Durham she was smart and capable of doing college-level work. But Durham would be the first in her family to go to college, so she was unfamiliar with the whole idea of higher education. All she knew was college costs money, and her father couldn't afford it. Then she learned her senior high school class was the first to be offered Say Yes Tuition Scholarships, and that made all the difference. Still apprehensive about college, Durham went to a two-year community college to test the waters and build her confidence. "Without Say Yes, I wouldn't have been able to transfer to a four-year private university like SU, and because I graduated with a low debt load, I'm able to pursue a law degree. I never imagined I could aim so high," says Durham, who plans to practice law in Syracuse. "Say Yes is a great investment because it gave me a chance to prove to myself and my community that I can rise above the stereotypes and give back. I just want to stay here and help—Syracuse can always use another good defense attorney."

Photo by Susan Kahn



NICHOLAS MAKHLLOUF '13

"I can't even begin to
show my gratitude."

EDUCATION:

Corcoran High School; civil engineering major, L.C. Smith College of Engineering and Computer Science.

ACTIVITIES: Conducted after-school science experiments with middle school students in city schools.

CAREER GOAL: Civil engineer

NEXT STEPS: Moving to Scottsdale, Arizona, to work as a staff engineer at C&S Companies, a Syracuse-based engineering firm.

SAY YES EXPERIENCE: Nicholas Makhlof had always planned on attending college, but it wasn't clear to him how he was going to afford it without taking on a lot of debt. When he first heard about

Say Yes, he thought it would be awesome if it were true, but decided to wait and see what would come of it. Maybe he would have to go to a community college for two years and then transfer to SU, just as his father did when he immigrated to the United States from Jordan. But when Makhlof was offered a Say Yes Tuition Scholarship, there was no doubt he would commit to SU. "I really appreciate Say Yes, not just for me, but for all of the students it will affect now and in the future," Makhlof says. "It is not every day young people get opportunities like this, and I've seen other kids blow their chance for a college degree. They let it slip out of their hands and give up too soon because they know they can't afford to go to college. This is such a huge thing, so it's hard to express my appreciation other than being successful in life. I can't even begin to show my gratitude, but hopefully one day I'll be able to pay something back to the Say Yes program."